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DCDS (Commitment)

D/DCDS(C)/IRAQ

STRATEGIC FAILURE IN IRAQ – CONSEQUENCES AND RISKS

ISSUE

1. To outline the consequences and risk of strategic failure in Iraq in the light of US requests for additional UK forces.

TIMING

2. Priority.

WORKING ASSUMPTIONS

3. Strategic failure in Iraq could emanate from a wide range of eventualities. Two scenarios have been considered for this paper. The *most damaging*, from the international perspective, would be a catastrophic failure (however caused) leading to coalition withdrawal, anarchy and the ensuing reverberations around the region and globally. The *most likely* contingency considered would be the failure to achieve the Steady State Criteria¹ (SSC) resulting in a slowly, and irrevocably, deteriorating situation from which there was no apparent exit. It is axiomatic that the actual effect achieved by the deployment, or otherwise, of UK forces will depend on the situation in Iraq as it develops – especially as this could be some months away and certainly after the transition date of 1 July.

KEY JUDGEMENTS

4. The key judgements drawn are as follows:
 - a. From UK and US policy perspectives, complete coalition failure would be politically unacceptable².
 - b. Failure to achieve the SSC would risk the UK Armed Forces becoming very largely committed to training, preparing, equipping and structured for operations in Iraq – to the detriment of the wider range of contingent military tasks, including focused intervention responses to terrorist or WMD threats.
 - c. If the UK was to accede to US requests for a greater military presence in Iraq, the more significant our contribution, the greater the

¹ Presented to OPCOS in D/DCDS(C)/IRAQ dated 29 Apr 04. This defined the SSC as: 'an effective, transitional, representative government in Iraq, capable of providing sufficient security, in conjunction with the Coalition, to allow the achievement of their economic and social objectives and further representative political process'.

² President Bush, in a news conference on 14 Apr 04 used the expression 'unthinkable'. This attitude permeates the whole Administration.

likelihood that the 'UK approach' could stabilise the Shi'a areas. In addition to the benefits of securing this flank, this would also help to reduce the risk of Sunni/Shi'a conflict escalating. This would be contingent on what US forces were doing elsewhere.

d. Nevertheless, we cannot categorically say that UK provision of extra support would prevent mission failure; neither would it guarantee success.

THE MOST DAMAGING FAILURE

5. The worst-case scenario, in which the coalition quits Iraq prior to the achievement of SSC, would leave such a vacuum that the Country would descend into anarchy³; the probability of a sustainable successor state emerging within current borders would be minimal. Whilst a domino effect around the Middle-East (ME) would be unlikely, the very least that could be expected would be vigorous Kurdish moves towards independence with serious consequences for relations with Iran, Syria and Turkey (and hence the wider NATO community). Instability in Iraq would further impact on Syria and Jordan with a knock-on effect into Israel, the Lebanon and the wider MEPP.

6. A serious power vacuum in Iraq would be exploited by Al Qaida (AQ), and related groups, to regroup and rebuild training capability lost in Afghanistan. AQ would flourish in this situation with increased potential for proliferation of CBRN. The AQ leadership would also seize upon the opportunity of filling the vacuum as the first serious step in their aspiration to form a global Caliphate. This, in turn, would have serious implications for stability within Saudi Arabia and Iran.

7. The loss of oil reserves in Iraq, if coupled with a high risk of instability in Saudi, could have a major impact on macro-economics and could provide the catalyst for a global energy crisis. There would be further large-scale repercussions resulting from the humiliation of the hegemonic power leading, at least, to isolationism. The US and the UK would be held responsible for the failure throughout the ME region (and elsewhere) leading to loss of influence and/or reduced co-operation over policy/economic affairs and defence. A 'hangover' similar to that following Suez and Vietnam would be likely to inhibit interventions by the US and the UK for several years, with serious repercussions on countering terrorism, and the spread of WMD.

THE MOST LIKELY FAILURE

8. The UK continues to plan on an interim strategic goal in Iraq predicated upon reaching the SSC. Achievement of this would facilitate the Iraqi people assuming responsibility for their own destiny and would enable gradual coalition military disengagement⁴. Failure to achieve SSC would leave the

³ As occurred in Afghanistan after the Russians withdrew.

⁴ Through the sequential process of local, regional and then strategic hand-off.

coalition with little option but to continue to shore up a tottering state – effectively retaining the *de facto* responsibilities of the occupying powers. In such circumstances, consent would become increasingly difficult to retain; lawlessness would spread; aid agencies would become even more reluctant to remain engaged; and, the reliance on the military to prevent total descent into anarchy would increase. This trend would be difficult to stabilise and, in the short term, equally difficult to reverse.

9. In these circumstances, the UN would, once again, be very unwilling to engage in the process. Furthermore, coalition partners would be difficult to retain and nigh on impossible to recruit. The UK and the US would therefore be committed to remain in place on a significant scale, for some considerable period of time. Force generation would soon reach the point, particularly for land forces, where training, equipping and preparation for TELIC would subsume all other activity⁵. This would have a serious impact, for example, on force structures, personnel retention and on our ability to undertake a wider range of military operations. Some capabilities may be lost – either permanently, or to the extent that they would require disproportionate effort and expense to regain. Our ability to undertake the wider range of contingent military tasks, including focused intervention responses to terrorist or WMD threats, would be severely constrained. From an MoD perspective, and the formal definitions of risk, this becomes the most damaging scenario in terms of failing to achieve Departmental objectives (and undermining the reputation established by the UK military in operations in the Balkans, Afghanistan and the first Gulf War)

RISK OF FAILURE

10. As things stand, the current US Administration is proving resolute in its determination to stay the course in Iraq, whatever it takes. How sustainable this will prove to be – either with a new administration, or in the event of a major catastrophe, is beyond the scope of this paper. In the meantime, therefore, catastrophic coalition failure remains 'unthinkable'. We consider that the US will continue to provide sufficient force elements to prevent this contingency. The issue of the UK acceding to the US request for extra support is therefore not considered to be essential in mitigating the risk of circumstances leading to total withdrawal.

11. Beyond the military line of operation, the risk, or uncertainty, becomes more complex. The UN is, in many respects, our political 'vital ground'. The onus will be on Brahimi to assist the new Iraqi administration in developing the legitimacy of the new regime. But this will be a very fragile process. Firstly, the UN is not in a robust mood after the attacks in Aug 03. Secondly, legitimacy could be threatened, at any stage, by, *inter alia*, heavy handed military tactics, perceptions that we are still occupying powers, or revelations of maladministration. Thirdly, elements in Iraq will deliberately seek to attack

⁵ There is a risk that this could occur anyway if the full deployment is undertaken for more than one rotation.

this process. Finally, there remains the risk of political disintegration either generally, or through Kurdish secessionist tendencies. Arguably, reinforcement of the military line of operation would go some way to mitigating these risks.

12. The more vexed issue is whether the expansion of the UK Area of Operations would enhance the prospects of the coalition achieving SSC. Inherent in this debate on the management of uncertainty is the question of whether or not we have the discretion not to attempt to mitigate the risk.

13. The effect achieved would be dependent on the degree of support that the UK was prepared to offer⁶; the more significant the contribution, arguably the more control we have over the effect achieved. If, for example, the UK were to accede to the US requests, and the military contribution was fully supported by OGDs, the transfer of two problematic (but sparsely populated) provinces would enable the US to redeploy their forces elsewhere, while enhancing the prospects of success in the rump MND(CS) area. Furthermore, it would remove some sensitive Shi'a areas from the risk of purely kinetic solutions⁷. This in turn would help to improve Shi'a consent across a more uniform area thereby reducing the risk of Shi'a/Sunni (or Shi'a/Shi'a) conflict escalating. The visible evidence of the UK becoming the lead nation in handling sensitive issues such as the Holy Sites, and associated festivals, would have a beneficial IO message in the Shi'a areas of Iraq, and in Iran. We consider, however, that the degree of Shi'a consent achievable will be at least partly dependent on the actions of US forces in the interim. In short, if any deployment is considerably delayed, there is a distinct risk of alienation of the population to the extent that the 'UK approach' could not gain traction, at least in the short to medium term.

14. It is notable that the US had deployed forces into these two provinces before the Spanish decision to withdraw. If the UK did not accept responsibility for the two extra provinces, it is inconceivable that the US would leave a void. But, as there are no indications of troop contributions from other nations for either of these provinces, or to backfill in the MND(SE), the stretch on US resources would remain. This would leave the US forces exposed with the risk of them falling back on ill-considered action. Arguably, the longer they remain stretched, the greater the risk of this eventuality.

15. There is also a significant risk that, even if the UK gained consent in the Shi'a areas, the US forces may fail to do so elsewhere. This could either precipitate total collapse of the coalition or, more likely, contribute to the gradual decline. This possibility also raises the spectre of a divided, or partitioned, Iraq.

⁶ The full range of COAs is being worked through by DJtCts as directed at OpCOS, 12 May 04.

⁷ Although US forces have backed away from the 'hard' approach around Fallujah, there is no guarantee that this will be maintained. The situation around Najaf remains relatively encouraging, but things could change quickly.

16. At the higher strategic levels, the evidence, thus far, is that the US authorities would not see our refusal as a serious coalition fracture. But others observing from within and beyond the coalition might. Our efforts to secure increased leverage and influence on the US – at all levels – has been dealt with elsewhere. Providing that we gain traction on these benefits, they could prove to be a useful precedent.

CONCLUSIONS

17. The catastrophic scenario in which the coalition was forced to leave Iraq completely would allow the armed forces to recuperate more rapidly, but would be a disaster politically. The converse is arguably the case on the other scenario which would be debilitating for the military, but pose fewer problems on the diplomatic or political front. Leaving aside the risk of catastrophic failure, we consider that UK accession to the US requests for military support will not, in itself, guarantee the achievement of SSC – even if we met those requests in full. Nor can we say categorically that our refusal so to do will seriously impede progress, or irrevocably fracture the coalition. The question remains more as to whether we can afford to take the risk of not doing so with the concomitant chance of further deterioration, and failure to extract our forces in the medium or long term.

DCDS(C)

12 May 04